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Kathmandu, Feb. 24 - Representatives of Nepal Judiciary, Nepal Bar Association, Civil Society, The Asia Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) came together to celebrate the accomplishments of USAID's Strengthen Rule of Law programme Tuesday.

This program is increasing access to justice for society's most vulnerable groups; expediting the delivery of justice through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms; and improving the administration of the courts, according to a USAID statement.

The two-year \$1.7 million programme, funded by USAID and implemented by The Asia Foundation, was designed in extensive consultation with the Judiciary and NGO partners.

The close-out ceremony was attended by many senior judges and justice sector dignitaries who lauded U.S.-Nepal cooperation and appreciated the programme's contributions to improving the quality and access to justice in Nepal.

Dr. Kevin Rushing, Mission Director of USAID/Nepal, remarked, "In post-conflict settings like Nepal, re-establishing and strengthening the rule of law is crucial to ensure the transition to peace and to enable development. Through these efforts many more Nepali are now able to obtain redress and justice through the legal system – reducing the temptation to resort to illegitimate means. As debates about restructuring the Nepali state continues, the U.S. Government remains firmly committed to promoting the idea that democracy will only be sustainable if it is underpinned by good governance, citizen's access to justice, and a broader respect for the rule of law."

The program established three new court-annexed mediation centers and two commercial mediation centers and continued to support operations of three mediation centers opened under a previous project. In just the two-year program period, more than 1,700 cases were referred for mediation, helping reduce the number of back-logged cases and expedite the delivery of justice for the average Nepali and these referrals will continue.

Chief guest at the event, Ram Prasad Shrestha, Supreme Court Justice, said "The Supreme Court is committed to maintaining the current centers and expects to open 22 additional centers across the country."

To improve the administration of justice in courts, the program provided technical and material assistance, including training to over 500 justice-sector personnel. The program also introduced an effective case tracking and management system across several courts in Nepal, including the Supreme Court. This has reduced the time required for a court case to proceed from filing to final decision; increased access to court files by clients; and improved communication and coordination between courts.

The Strengthen Rule of Law programme provided free legal aid for over 900 people unable to afford their own attorneys, as well as public interest litigation that helped spur significant positive social change by pushing the government to comply with existing laws and raising public awareness about injustices, the statement said.